Eyes Like the Texas Sky

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Eyes Like the Texas Sky

by RogueTranslator

Summary

Dean is sixteen when he falls for a guy for the first time. He’s a cowboy with careless dark hair and blue eyes as warm and bright as the endless Texas sky.

It doesn’t happen again until Castiel. Dean has a type, apparently.

Notes

Prompt:

Dean discovers his love of cowboys at an early age. They're rough and tumble as they fight the good fight and skirt or break the law to do so, and despite their tough and brute exterior they're also clever, wise, caring, kind.. and even soft. They're also sexy and cute and kinda beautiful - often in a tragic way.

The one where young Dean realises he doesn't just want to be *like* a cowboy, he wants to be *with* one.

do want: Young Dean's love of cowboys playing a part in his sexual awakening/realising he likes boys the way he likes girls. Older Dean realising Cas has a lot in common with those beloved cowboys. bonus: Dean and Cas getting together. Rating up to you.

do not want: angst

Another month, another boys' home.

This one's a ranch in West Texas, balancing on the knife edge of the New Mexico line. John stops to let Dean out where the ranch-to-market road meets the dirt driveway, barely giving him enough time to hug Sam before muttering something about being back in a couple weeks, maybe. Dean turns his back on the Impala and trudges up the driveway before John even puts the car back in drive. No reason to make his dad even angrier by letting him see him cry.

The driveway to the ranch house is a mile long, maybe more. Dust eddies float up underfoot, staining Dean's black jeans reddish-brown. There's nothing on either side but scrub and the occasional lonely desert willow. It's early afternoon in July, and Dean is sweating all down his back by the time he reaches the front porch.

The guy who runs the home is called Arlo. He's tall and bearded and wears a salmon denim shirt tucked into a huge belt buckle. He's got a cowboy hat on and Dean asks, once Arlo is finished with showing him around the place, whether he can have one. Arlo chortles because every boy who comes here asks that. He says there'll be one waiting for Dean at breakfast tomorrow.

Dean isn't sure why Arlo finds it so funny. It's one of the things he mulls over after lights-out that night before finally drifting off, more because there's nothing else to do than because he's tired.

Castiel is saying something to him. Dean smiles back, hoping that it wasn't something that needed a reply. Castiel frowns. Of course it needed a reply.

"Sorry, Cass. Just spaced out for a minute."

Castiel grunts. He's annoyed, Dean can tell, but isn't going to make a big deal out of it. He usually doesn't.

"You going to tell me what you said, or?"

"I said that Adam and Michael seem very happy together."

"Ah." Dean tips the rest of the whiskey past his lips. "Yeah. About

time the kid caught a break."

He looks down at his empty glass, considering. He glances at Castiel. Without Dean having to say anything, Castiel unstops the decanter and pours both of them some more. They clink glasses for the third time that night.

"An angel and a human," Castiel says, after a while. He says it as if the thought were only just occurring to him.

Dean turns to the bookshelves across from them and snorts. They've been dancing around things since Castiel came back from the Empty. He's not sure why. They're retired, so it's not like they have the reasons they used to have.

"You hinting at something, Cass?"

Dean throws him a little grin. Castiel doesn't meet his eyes.

"What would I be hinting at?"

Dean sighs. It's late at night and they've been drinking and talking for two hours and they're still stubborn. Still in their carved-out spaces. It's his fault. Castiel's been honest and brave and he's probably hurting every day for not knowing where the two of them stand, no matter what he says. He's been back from the Empty for more than a month now and Dean doesn't have the excuse any longer of not having had enough time to process it all.

Dean knows all this.

Instead of replying, he turns back to the bookshelves and takes another sip of his whiskey.

Breakfast is eggs with chili peppers and tomatoes, buttered toast on the side. Dean eats everything he's served and even gets seconds. He thinks he might not mind this place so much. He didn't mind Sonny's place much, either, and he still feels guilty about that sometimes.

"How old are you, chavo?"

Dean looks up at the guy across from him. He's one of the cowboys,

one of Arlo's ranchhands. He barely looks old enough to not be one of the boys here himself.

"How old are *you*?" Dean says warily.

The cowboy and Arlo share a good-natured chuckle across the length of the kitchen.

"Nineteen. Your turn."

"Sixteen." Dean slides down a little in his chair. "And a half. Why do you want to know?"

The cowboy takes a sip of coffee rather than replying, smiling at Dean before and after. He has big white teeth and wide blue eyes that crinkle when he smiles. He has messy dark hair and light brown skin and Dean realizes he's noticing way too many of his features.

"It's so he knows what jobs you can legally do around the ranch," Arlo answers for him. "Since you're sixteen, you can do anything. Within the realm of your abilities, of course."

"Anything" probably means cleaning out stables or shoveling manure, if Dean has to guess. Juvenile delinquents are good for doing the tasks no one else wants.

"Valentín," the cowboy says, reaching his hand across the table suddenly. "Tín is fine."

He says it like "teen," but with a flip on the t. Dean tries it on his tongue.

"Dean," he responds, shaking his hand.

"If someone calls one of you from far away, you'll both come running," Arlo quips.

"Fifty-fifty chance it's me, I might as well ride over first." Valentín winks at Dean. "I'm probably quicker on a horse."

"Teach me how to ride." Dean licks his lips without meaning to. "I'm a fast learner."

Valentín blinks, and the air in the kitchen is awkward for just a moment. Then, he stands, drains his coffee, and places his hat on his head.

“We’ll start with mucking out the stables. See where things go from there.” He stops at the screen door. “You ready?”

“He needs to take care of his dishes first,” Arlo chides. “So do you, Tín.”

“I’ll do it.” Dean springs up and adds Valentín’s mug to his plate, fork, and glass. “Meet you out there?”

Valentín actually tips his cowboy hat to Dean before walking out into the cool summer morning. Dean actually feels his knees wobble.

“Dean.”

“What? Oh.”

“Am I boring you?” Castiel says frostily.

“No.” Dean angles his head a little to the side and blinks slowly at Castiel. It’s the gesture he knows will get Castiel to forgive him a small thing like this. “Was just remembering something.”

Castiel huffs. He finishes the rest of his whiskey and places the glass on the bar cart a little too loudly.

“Want me to tell you about it?”

“Sure. I’ll actually pay attention.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Stop bitching. I think you’ll like this story.”

Castiel seems thrown off by that. He shifts in his seat a little to face Dean.

“So, you know how I really like cowboys?”

Valentín is moving a wheelbarrow around outside the horse stable. When he sees Dean coming, he puts his hands on his hips.

“Nice hat.”

“Thanks.” Dean adjusts his straw cowboy hat, which feels just a little too big for his head. “I like yours more, though.”

Valentín runs two fingers along its brim. “I can tell you where I got it in town. You can save your allowance and buy one like it.”

Dean doesn’t like that he said “allowance.” It makes Dean sound like a little kid. He puffs himself up and walks to the door of the stable, pretending like he knows what he’s looking for. When he stands up straight, he’s a fraction of an inch taller than Valentín. He feels good about that.

“You ever mucked out a horse stall?”

“No. But I told you, I learn fast.”

“It’s not rocket science,” Valentín says, and Dean can’t tell whether he’s encouraging him or making fun. “We remove the manure and soiled straw with pitchforks, then spread new bedding down. Sweep out the stable and put all the feed and water tubs back in. Then we take the wheelbarrow and dump everything in the manure pile. Sometimes you’ll have to make more than one trip.”

“Sexy,” Dean says. “Do you make all the boys do this job, or am I just special?”

“Everyone learns how to do it when they first get here. We take turns at all the chores.” Valentín hands him a pair of work gloves. “Put those on and we’ll get started.”

Valentín checks something on a clipboard that’s hanging beside the doorway. He’s wearing some sort of blanket around his top half, and he has to adjust it a little because it starts falling down when he bends forward to snip the ties around a bale of straw.

“Don’t you get hot in that?” Dean says. “In that…blanket or whatever?”

“It’s a sarape,” Valentín says, with more fatigue than irritation. “It’s a Mexican thing.”

“Sarape,” Dean sounds out. “It’s nice. More colorful than anything I own, but you can pull it off.”

Valentín blinks at Dean a few times. “Thank you. And to answer your question, it’s not too hot. But I’ve lived in West Texas all my life, so I’m used to the temperatures here. Let’s, uh—” he gestures past Dean. “Let’s get started.”

They move the horses’ water and food out of the stable. Valentín shows Dean how to use a pitchfork to piece through the straw. He says it’s like cleaning a cat’s litterbox, but Dean tells him his family’s never owned a pet. They stop talking for a while after that.

“So, what’d you do, chavo?”

Valentín says it from the next stall, and Dean has to stand up and peer through the bars to see him.

“Fine if you don’t want to tell me,” he says, without looking up. “You don’t have to.”

“I got into a fight with a guy who was trying to cheat me at cards. Spent the night at the police station. My dad had to come and bail me out. Brought me straight here.”

If Valentín has any reaction, Dean can’t discern it.

“What does that mean?” Dean says. “‘Chavo?’”

“Just means boy. Or kid.”

Dean bristles. “I’m not a kid.”

Valentín straightens up and leans on his pitchfork. “Okay. I won’t call you that, then.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” Valentín slants his head. “Why were you gambling? Just for fun, or—”

“Needed the money,” Dean mumbles. “For food.”

“Your father doesn’t buy you food?”

Dean turns and starts mucking out the stall again. He hears Valentín resume on his side of the wall.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” Dean finally says. “You know, make friends with me so I have a ‘good influence.’ Turn me away from

this dark, dangerous path I'm on. I know how this whole thing works."

"Oh yeah?"

He's so hard to read. He's not like John, whose every mood fills whatever room he's in, choking out the oxygen from anything else. He's not like Sam, who blurts out every fanciful thought he has—as long as John isn't around. There's a stillness around Valentín, a reserve that throws Dean off because he's not used to people who don't make their expectations of him clear right from the start. Maybe it's that famous stoicism that cowboys have, at least in movies. Dean grins at that.

"Looks good," Valentín says. He's right behind him, and Dean starts.

"I'm pretty good at cleaning up messes," Dean says. He thinks it'll sound grown-up, capable, but instead it comes out green and gawky. Valentín doesn't seem to take any notice. Dean's starting to really like that about him.

They finish with the stable and start the next job, cleaning and repairing some of the ranch's tools and equipment. It's boring, but something they can do in the shade, which Dean is grateful for. The heat is stifling even under the tin roof of the open-air tool shed. Eventually, Valentín unwinds his sarape, folds it into a neat square, and places it beside him on the bench. Underneath, he's wearing a white V-neck with short sleeves and a thin silver chain that hangs along his collarbones before plunging down, out of sight. His biceps pop and extend as he screws new heads onto shovels and rakes and push brooms, and Dean stares until Valentín looks up at him.

"Nice guns," Dean says. He clears his throat.

"Thank you, guapo," Valentín says, his blue eyes as warm and bright as the endless Texas sky. It's the first time Dean hears him laugh.

"Your father abandoned you because *he* didn't give you enough money for you and Sam to eat?"

Dean pauses. "Well, he came back. Anyway, that's not the point of the story."

Castiel stares daggers at the wall. Dean guesses the first family dinner in Heaven with all of them present will be an uncomfortable affair. Hopefully they'll have a fair few decades before then.

"I wish I could've been there to look out for you then, Dean."

Dean places his empty glass beside Castiel's.

"You're here now, Cass. You've been here for more than half of my adult life. Besides, everything turned out alright, didn't it?"

Castiel makes a noise in his throat that means grudging agreement. The fact that Dean knows that pleases him maybe more than it should.

"Okay," Dean says, rubbing his hands together. "Back to cowboys."

Over the next few days, Valentín introduces Dean to all the various chores around the ranch. There's caring for the animals, checking the fences and water sources, patrolling for predators, watering and weeding the vegetable garden, cooking and cleaning shifts. He gets Dean on a horse on day two, and by the end of Dean's first week there he can sit in the saddle right and stop and start a walk. He hasn't quite mastered the dismount, and Valentín has to catch him, his grip tight on Dean's waist, when he slides off the horse's flank clumsily. After a couple times, he could probably manage it himself, but he pretends to be more uncoordinated than he is. The feeling of Valentín's hands on him shoots a thrill up his spine and down to the front of his jeans.

"Don't be scared," Valentín says, his voice as calm and deep as lake water. His hands are still at Dean's sides, and it's all Dean can do to not lean back into him.

"Huh?"

"If you're afraid of falling, it makes it harder. You have to just make the leap and trust the horse. And yourself."

"I trust *you*," Dean says softly. God, what his dad would say if he heard that.

Valentín laughs a rumbling laugh and lets Dean go. "I won't always be there to catch you."

“Why?” Dean spins around. “You going somewhere?”

Valentín tilts his head a bit. “No, but you are. Your dad’s coming back for you eventually, isn’t he?”

Dean shrugs. “No idea.”

Valentín seems pained by that. It’s not often that he shows much emotion.

“You deserve better, Dean. You’re a good kid.”

“Not a kid,” Dean says, missing the point entirely.

“Right.” Valentín’s grin is just a little lopsided—he was thrown from a horse when he was twelve, and his jaw never healed right. Dean can’t imagine him looking even more perfect than he already does.

“You want to—” Dean swallows. “You want to watch a movie with me tonight? Arlo said you stay later on the weekends sometimes.”

“Okay,” Valentín says, as casual as always. He strokes the mare’s neck, and she snuffles happily. “What movie?”

“I was thinking a cowboy movie. Like *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Or *Tombstone*. You ever seen that one?”

Valentín snorts. “Those aren’t cowboy movies, guapo.”

Dean’s face is warm—from the blazing sun, from being corrected, from hearing Valentín call him guapo again. He can’t speak.

“They’re Wild West films. You know, shooting up saloons, that kind of thing. I doubt any of those guys knew how to cut a herd or rope a calf.”

“You carry a gun,” Dean points out.

“For scaring off coyotes. Let’s watch a movie with actual cattle in it. You ever seen *Red River*? It’s even set in Texas, too.”

After dinner, Valentín finds the VHS in Arlo’s collection. A few of the other boys join them in the TV room. Dean doesn’t mind, since that gives him a reason to sit in the middle of the couch, next to Valentín, rather than at the other end.

It’s not a bad movie, but it’s in black and white and over two hours

long. Dean dozes off somewhere in the last third, resting his head on Valentín. His sarape is soft and smells of musk and horses and the olive-oil-and-peppermint soap he uses. Dean feels safer and more taken care of than he has in a long time. Maybe ever.

When Dean opens his eyes, the screen is dark and the TV room is empty except for him and Valentín.

“Sorry,” Dean mutters. He pushes himself up. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You seemed like you needed the rest. Riding is tiring, no?”

“Yeah.” Dean stretches and yawns. “I want to do more of it tomorrow, though. I’m getting pretty good.”

“Except for the dismount.” Valentín winks.

Dean leans towards him, just a few inches. Valentín looks down at Dean’s lips and frowns. He clears his throat.

“I better drive home. It’s getting pretty late.” He rises from the couch and pats the pocket that has his keys in it.

“Goodnight, guapo,” Dean says.

Valentín makes an odd sound, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. He picks up his cowboy hat but doesn’t put it on, instead holding it at his side stiffly.

“Goodnight, Dean,” he finally says. “See you tomorrow.”

“*Red River*,” Castiel says.

“Yeah. I made you watch that one, remember?”

After a moment, Castiel nods. “The one where the two guys compare pistols.”

“Yeah.” Dean swallows. “Wait, that’s all you remember about it?”

Castiel shrugs. “At least I didn’t fall asleep during it.”

“You don’t even—” Dean glares at Castiel’s sly smile. “I’m starting to regret telling you this story.”

Castiel winks one of those sky-blue eyes, and something drops in Dean’s chest. He feels sixteen again, for better or worse.

Valentín starts taking Dean on his patrols around the ranch’s perimeter. They check and repair fences, nudge stray cattle back towards the herd, and scare off any coyotes. More than any of that, though, they talk. Dean’s not sure when he stopped caring that Valentín’s just befriending him to be a good influence. He tells him things he’s only ever told Sam; he tells him things he *hasn’t* told Sam. He’s known him for two weeks.

One day, they’re riding near the northeastern limit of Arlo’s property when a rattlesnake darts up from a pile of rocks just in front of them. Valentín’s gelding rears back, blotting out the late-afternoon sun. By instinct, Dean yanks the pistol his father gave him out of his waistband and shoots. The rattler drops.

Valentín calms his horse, eyeing Dean all the while. Dean’s already hidden the gun under his shirt again, where it burns against his skin like a fresh scar.

“My dad gave it to me,” Dean explains, though Valentín hasn’t said anything yet. “To protect myself.”

For the first time, Valentín looks angry. He turns to look at the ranch house, nothing more than a speck on the horizon, then back at Dean.

“To protect yourself?”

“And my brother.”

“Why doesn’t he do it?”

“He—he does. But he can’t all the time.”

Valentín is frustrated. It doesn’t connect for him. Dean actually considers telling him about hunting. Maybe if he knows, he’ll understand Dean better. Maybe they’ll grow closer.

Dean mulls this over while Valentín dismounts and inspects the snake. He whistles.

“Entre los ojos,” he murmurs. Then, when he sees that Dean heard him: “Between the eyes. Damn, guapo.”

Dean blushes. “I know how to handle myself.”

Valentín paces. The brim of his cowboy hat blocks most of his face.

“If Arlo finds out you have that, he’ll kick you out. Might not even wait for your dad to get here.”

“Please. I’m sorry, please don’t—” Dean sniffs. “If he calls my dad, I don’t know what he’ll do.”

Valentín just stares at him. There’s so much on his face, even with his hat shadowing most of it: doubt, compassion, sorrow, fury. It’s a look that haunts Dean for years after.

“I won’t tell him,” he finally says. “On the condition that you never shoot that again while you’re here. Let me take care of anything like that in the future.”

“Yeah. Yeah, deal.”

Valentín mounts his horse again. His thumb strokes the reins pensively.

“Thank you,” Dean almost whispers. “Thank you so much.”

Valentín shrugs. “You’re a good—” he breaks off, laughing his low, rumbling laugh.

“Not a kid,” Dean says, less petulantly than usual. He almost sounds like he believes it.

“No.” He winks at Dean, though there’s still some sadness in his eyes. “Vamos, guapo. It’s almost dinnertime.”

That weekend, Arlo drives all the boys to the movie theater in town to watch *Batman Forever*. It’s Valentín’s day off and Dean hasn’t been able to stop thinking about him since waking up. By chance, he’s standing in the lobby with a group of friends after the movie is over. He taps two fingers to his hat as Arlo and the boys pass. Dean thinks Valentín looks at him the longest.

In the van on the way home, Dean is elated. He didn't see any girls in the group with Valentín. The thought of girls around him makes Dean more jealous than he's ever felt in his entire life.

"He sounds like a good man," Castiel interrupts.

"Yeah, he was." Dean looks at his hands. "Is. I don't know."

"You don't keep in touch with him?"

"It was 1995. Not as many ways to keep in contact as there are now. Besides, something…happened."

Castiel tilts his head.

"Yeah, uh." Dean rubs his brow. He feels a pinching in his lungs. He decided to tell this story, needed to tell this story to get Castiel to understand, but it's still hard. For a second, he considers wimping out, calling it a night.

"Dean?"

"Sorry. Just thinking." He reassures Castiel with a smile. "Almost finished."

Dean's been at Arlo's ranch for nearly a month. It's starting to feel like home—not that he'd know what that's like. Other than Sam's phone calls, the thing he looks forward to the most is the time he gets to spend alone with Valentín.

It's romantic, his teenage brain thinks. Two cowboys, riding side by side into the sunset. Valentín sure fits the part of a dashing hero. He's strong and confident and looks like a goddamn hotter Clint Eastwood with his sarape around his shoulders and his revolver on his hip. He moves his horse with cues so subtle that Dean still can't see them and cuts into herds of cattle like a silver knife through a shifter. Dean can't even care that he's got the hots for a dude. He doesn't see how

anyone, male or female, wouldn't fall head over heels for this guy.

Then, Arlo gets a call. He sits Dean down at the kitchen table after lunch and tells him that John is coming back for him in two days. He asks Dean—slowly, cautiously—if this is what he wants. Dean just shrugs. He's known all along that he'll have to go back to reality eventually. And besides, Sam needs him.

Still, he curls up in his bed that night and cries.

The next day, Dean moves through his chores in a daze. Valentín isn't coming until the afternoon because he has a dentist's appointment in the morning. Dean's stomach won't stop churning and all he has to eat for most of the day is a few graham crackers and an apple.

Valentín arrives at the house while Dean is still washing the lunch dishes. He claps Dean on the back.

"No cavities, guapo."

He notices instantly.

"What's wrong?"

Dean screws his eyes shut. His hands are trembling under the faucet.

"Can you stay after dinner for a little bit? It's something I want to talk about in private."

"No problem." Valentín rubs his back. "Whatever it is, it's going to be alright. Okay?"

Dean almost cries again because Valentín can't fucking promise that. He manages to hold things together, though, just giving a grim nod in response.

Dinner comes and goes, and Dean is still hesitating. Valentín is patient, helping with the chores and talking with the other boys until Dean comes up to him and asks if they can talk outside. They walk to his truck and get into the cab. Valentín just sits quietly, waiting for Dean to speak. The motion-triggered porchlight turns off, and there's only the moon and stars.

"My dad's coming for me tomorrow," Dean says.

Valentín searches Dean's face. "How do you feel about that?"

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t get a choice. And I want to see my brother, so….”

“But you don’t feel happy?”

“Life isn’t about being happy,” Dean says, reciting one of John’s most frequent refrains.

Valentín sighs. Dean wonders if he’s finally given up on him. Everyone does eventually.

“I want you to do what makes you happy, Dean. It’s your life, not your father’s. Not even your brother’s. I don’t mean right now—I know you don’t have much of a choice. I mean when you’re older. When you get a choice.”

Valentín turns to him. It’s the most he’s said at once in the entire month they’ve known each other. He’s delivering it all in that steady, soothing voice, and Dean almost believes in what he’s saying.

“Find your own way. Trust yourself. Believe in yourself. You deserve a hell of a lot more from life than you’ve been given so far.” He chuckles. “Dammit, you were right that first time we talked. I’m just reciting all the ‘good influence’ lines to you.”

He looks at Dean like he expects him to share in the laugh. Instead, Dean leans across the front seat, brings one of his hands to Valentín’s cheek, and kisses him. His lips are pillowy and taste like the orange sherbet Arlo served for dessert. Dean kisses him a few more times, reaching up through Valentín’s unruly hair to knock the cowboy hat off his head. He clutches at Valentín’s thigh with his other hand, sliding closer and closer to what’s between his legs. Before he gets there, he feels a soft pressure in the center of his chest. It’s Valentín’s palm.

“Stop, Dean.”

He says it calmly, kindly. There’s no anger there. No disgust. But no desire, either. Dean gulps and sits back. He stares down at the dim moonlight on the seat leather.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why the hell I did that.”

“It’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with…being that way. I’m not—”

“Neither am I,” Dean says, too quickly. “I’m not fucking gay.”

Valentín lets a moment go by in silence. He doesn't point out how ridiculous Dean is. It doesn't seem possible, but Dean loves him even more for that.

"And besides, I'm too old for you." Valentín forces out a laugh.

"Three years isn't that much," Dean mumbles.

Valentín doesn't respond to that. He says that Dean should go back inside and start packing for tomorrow. He says that he'll be back in the morning and he'll say goodbye then. Dean watches his truck's taillights disappear down the dirt driveway from inside the screen door. He doesn't know how long he stands there.

Dean doesn't have to do chores the next day. He spends the morning waiting on the front porch with his bags. He wants to see Valentín, but he's not even sure Valentín will want to talk to him anymore. His body feels worn out by all the anxiety of the last forty-eight hours and the thought of returning to gross motel beds and ramen and cereal for every meal makes him nauseous. He closes his eyes and fantasizes about riding off into the sunset with Valentín. It's pathetic but it's the only thing keeping him from spinning apart right now.

"Dean?"

There's the sound of the screen door, and Dean opens his eyes. Valentín is smiling down at him, hat in hand.

"Hey. I was beginning to think you wouldn't show."

"I said I'd be here. A cowboy always keeps his word."

Dean snorts. "One reason I like them."

Valentín grins and looks down at his hat. He holds it out to Dean.

"I want you to have this. You said you liked it."

"What? No. I can't."

He steps forward and places it on Dean's head. It's soft and comfortable and smells like him so deeply that Dean feels like he's being held in his arms. Dean can hardly breathe.

"The fit's a little loose, but maybe you'll grow into it." Valentín runs his hands through his dark thatch of hair. "Better start working out your brain more, guapo."

Dean leaps up and hugs him. His hands shake against Valentín's shoulders.

"I'll miss you," Dean says.

"And I, you." Valentín soothes Dean's back. "I passed Arlo in the yard. Your dad called a few minutes ago from the gas station in town, so he'll be here any minute."

"I better start walking." Dean hoists his backpack and his duffel bag.

"I could go with you," Valentín says.

Dean doesn't know why he says no. Maybe because he doesn't think he deserves it. In the end, though, Valentín knows him better than that. He walks him to the road. It's nice to not have to walk the mile alone this time, even if they spend most of it in silence.

The Impala's already there by the time they reach the end of the driveway. Dean smiles a little at Sam's face in the window. He forces a smile at John's shadow.

"We probably shouldn't hug again," Dean mutters, once they're almost there. "My dad doesn't like soft things like that."

Valentín's expression is as stoic as always. Dean wants to etch it into his memory forever.

"Well, goodbye," Dean says. "Take care of yourself."

"Remember what I said." Valentín squeezes Dean's shoulder. "Good luck, Dean."

Dean gets into the car. Before they drive off, he sees Valentín peering at the driver's seat. If looks could kill, John would be dead several times over.

Dean watches Valentín fade away in the rear-view mirror until there's nothing left. He doesn't fall for a guy again for a long time.

"'A long time?'" Castiel says.

“Yeah.” Dean fidgets in his seat.

“I didn’t even know it happened the first time.”

“Well, I’ve never told anyone that story. Sam doesn’t even know.”

Castiel takes a deep breath.

“I don’t know why you’re telling me all this.”

Dean stares at him. He can’t be this dense. Can he?

“Wait here,” Dean says gruffly. He pushes himself upright and walks out of the library before Castiel can protest.

When he gets to his room, he turns on the bright overhead light so he can see into the closet. He shifts some folded winter clothes out of the way and retrieves an old box from the corner. A wistful smile pulls at Dean’s lips when he opens it and feels the cowboy hat. It’s soft felt, the color of fresh cream, with a white leather band around the crown that ties off in short, simple tassels. It still smells like sweat and horses and olive-oil-and-peppermint soap.

Castiel’s still in the same place when Dean gets back to the library. He tilts his head when he sees the cowboy hat.

“Is that his—”

“Yeah. I still have it.”

“Looks like the one you wore to Dodge City.”

“Go figure.”

Dean stops in front of Castiel, hesitates. He thinks about kissing Valentín in his truck cab and leaving the next day forever. He thinks about all he and Castiel have been through. He wonders to himself whether he’s ever actually followed Valentín’s advice in the two and a half decades since he promised to remember it.

“Dean?”

Dean looks up. Gently, he places the hat on Castiel’s head. It fits well. Dean steps back to look. Castiel stares back at him.

“I like it,” Dean says.

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “I know you like cowboys, Dean. Was that the point of that entire story?”

Dean rolls his eyes. He supposes it’s just a sign of how much he loves this angel that he finds his occasional obtuseness just part of his charm.

“No, you idiot. That wasn’t the point of the story.”

Dean sits down on Castiel’s lap, lifts his chin with his open palm, gazes into those eyes like the West Texas sky. He kisses him. It’s a slow, tender, steady kiss, and Dean realizes that Castiel was playing with him all along. He knew what the story was about.

“I love you,” Castiel says breathily. He’s stroking Dean’s thigh. He feels impossibly warm.

“I love you too.” Dean leans in close for another kiss, breathes Castiel’s air. “I’m sorry it took me so long to say it.”

“No,” Castiel says, his voice solid, grounding. His hands curve around Dean's waist, holding him up. “You took as long as you needed. And now I know why you like cowboys so much.”

Dean grins. He wraps his arms around Castiel’s shoulders, strokes his thumbs over his nape. He presses his forehead into the brim of Valentín’s hat.

“Well, cowboy.” Dean wiggles a little in Castiel’s lap. “I think it’s time you took me for a ride.”

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